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Jahangeer Moini Alamdari , Hamid Malekzade

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University of Tehran
Hamid Malekzadeh
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Is negative political ontology fundamental?

Phenomenology on the limits of Heideggerianism

Jakub Kowalewski

Associate Lecturer at the University of Winchester
jakub.j.j.kowalewski@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, my aim is to put into question Heideggerian versions of political ontology. In the first section of this article, I will discuss the main tenants of Heideggerian political ontology. I will then suggest that political ontologies indebted to Heidegger are based on a mistaken inference, which functions as incorrect evidence for the political effectiveness of Heidegger's concepts: the Heideggerians believe that the continuous changes which characterise ontic politics are an observable proof for the existence of a negative ontological foundation. My belief – which I will argue for in the second section of this paper – is that political phenomena do indeed appear as contingent (here I agree with the Heideggerians); however, this phenomenological fact does not necessitate the Heideggerian conclusion that ontic politics presupposes negative ontological foundations. Drawing on the phenomenological descriptions of Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, and Catherine Malabou, I will demonstrate that phenomena might simultaneously appear as contingent and as grounded in positive objects and processes. Phenomenology, therefore, provides resources to critique Heideggerian political ontology, and its conviction that ontic contingency is evidence for the existence of negative foundations. I will conclude the paper by offering a sketch of an alternative, positive political ontology centered on the notion of antagonism, and the concomitant concept of political change.

Keywords: Political difference, Contingency, Necessity, Antagonism.

Recent years have been marked by political re-interpretations – both explicit and implicit – of Martin Heidegger's ontology. As Oliver Marchart successfully shows, thinkers as diverse as Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, and Ernesto Laclau, share a conviction that Heideggerian ontology provides categories productive from a political point of view. The common belief shared by various Heideggerians is that the difference between "ontic" beings and "ontological" Being, expounded by Heidegger, can be found in the sphere of politics. "Ontic" politics – that is to say, everyday political choices, events, struggles – hide a more fundamental "ontological" dimension of the political. It is this deeper, ontological level of the political, which determines the character of the ontic level of everyday politics (Marchart, 2007).

In this paper, my aim is to put into question the specifically *Heideggerian* versions of political ontology. As I will show, political ontologies which model the difference between ontic *politics* and the ontological dimension of the *political* on the difference between ontic *beings* and ontological *Being* are committed to an incorrect view of the political. In short, their ontology is not right.

In the first section of this paper, I will discuss the main tenants of Heideggerian political ontology. I will then suggest that political ontologies indebted to Heidegger are based on a mistaken inference, which functions as an (incorrect) evidence for the political effectiveness of Heidegger's concepts: the Heideggerians believe that the continuous changes which characterize ontic politics are an observable proof for the existence of a *negative* ontological foundation analogical to Heidegger's Being; this negative foundation, in turn, determines the apparent contingency of everyday politics.

My belief – which I will argue for in the second section of this paper – is that political phenomena do indeed appear as contingent (here I agree with the Heideggerians); however, this phenomenological fact does not necessitate the Heideggerian conclusion that ontic politics presupposes *negative* ontological foundations. As I will demonstrate, the appearance of ontic politics as contingent is an "optical effect" that results from the interaction between, on the one hand, our subjective perspective as political observers, and, on the other hand, *positive* ontological relations and processes. Drawing on the phenomenological descriptions of Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, and Catherine Malabou, I will demonstrate that both objective

and subjective phenomena might simultaneously appear as contingent *and* as grounded in positive objects and processes. Phenomenology, therefore, provides resources to critique Heideggerian political ontology and its conviction that ontic contingency is an evidence for the existence of negative foundations.

In the last section, I sketch an alternative, positive political ontology centered on the notion of antagonism, which safeguards the possibility of political change. In order to do so, I clarify the notion of contingency operative in onto-political debates.

It is important to note that the theoretical discussion which follows is not without an impact on our engagement with everyday politics: without correct political ontology we will not be able to devise effective ontic political tactics, since the latter (in order to avoid being blind) must take into consideration the ontological processes which govern everyday politics. It follows that a correct ontological analysis of the level of the Political is a condition for successful participation in ontic politics. This fact adds an extra charge against Heideggerianism: since an incorrect political ontology should not be able to result in successful ontic tactics, the theoretical shortcomings of the Heideggerians make their political philosophies limited from the perspective of everyday politics.

Heideggerian political ontology

One of the most comprehensive, lucid, and convincing accounts of Heideggerian political ontology to date has been offered by Oliver Marchart (2007, 2018). Naturally, Marchart offers only one version of Heideggerian political ontology. However, since he masterfully shows the common ontological thread which ties together various political philosophies, he identifies and examines the main aspects of their Heideggerianism, and he draws out its consequences, I have decided to base my reading of Heideggerian political ontology on his studies.

In this section, I will discuss the concept of "political difference" as elaborated by Marchart, suggest a motivation for its introduction, and examine the ways in which political difference is known. This last point will allow me to develop a phenomenological critique of Heideggerian political ontology in the next section.

As mentioned in the introduction, what makes political ontology specifically Heideggerian is the modeling of a "political difference"

between ontic politics and the ontological dimension of the political, on the "ontological difference" between ontic beings and ontological Being – the trademark of Heidegger's thought in the late 1920s (Heidegger, 1962). What political Heideggerians find attractive in the ontological concept of Being, is that it functions as a foundation or a ground which "remains present in its absence". Being grounds ontic beings, while itself withdrawing or disappearing.

"For Heidegger," writes Marchart, "the absence of the ground is in the nature of an abyss, that is to say, of ground *without* ground, of a bottomless ground. So, grounding still occurs – the 'function' of the ground as the ground does not disappear completely. However, it occurs only to the extent that it passes through an 'a-byss' which is the ground: The ground grounds as a-byss." (2007, p. 18)

In this reading, Heidegger's Being is an "absent ground" endowed with a double function: on the one hand, it stabilizes ontic beings by grounding them; on the other hand, it destabilizes ontic beings by withdrawing and disappearing.

Read politically, the ontological difference separates ontic beings – which become everyday "politics" – and ontological Being – translated as "the political." This separation, in turn, institutes a relation between an ontological foundation (the political) and that which is grounded (politics). Furthermore, the conceptual mapping of Heideggerian Being onto the ontological sphere of the political turns the latter into an "absent ground" of everyday politics – a *negative* foundation that both stabilizes (*qua* ground) and destabilizes (*qua* absent) ontic politics. In other words, and perhaps paradoxically, the grounding of everyday politics by the ontological processes of the political, is at the same time an ungrounding – ontic politics are both founded and undermined by the political. It is worth quoting Marchart at length at this point:

"So, in a nutshell, what occurs within the moment of the political… is the following double-folded movement. On the one hand, the political, as the instituting moment of society, functions as a supplementary ground to the groundless stature of society, yet on the other hand, this supplementary ground withdraws in the very 'moment' in which it institutes the social. As a result, society will always be in search of an ultimate ground, while the maximum that can be achieved will be a fleeting and contingent *grounding* by way of politics – a plurality of partial grounds. This is how the dif-ferential

character of the political difference is to be understood: the political (located, as it were, on the 'ontological' side of Being-as-ground) will never be able fully to live up to its function as Ground – and yet it has to be actualized in the form of an always concrete *politics* that necessarily fails to deliver what it has promised. But politics and the political, the moment of ground and the moment of the actualization of this ground will never meet because of the unbridgeable chasm of the difference between these terms". (2007, p. 8)

I believe that the reason why ontological difference – and specifically the idea of Being as an "absent ground" – becomes attractive to political Heideggerians, is because it promises a conceptual model which satisfies two intuitions we share about politics. Firstly, that everyday political choices, events, and situations do not occur in a vacuum, nor that they are arbitrary. Rather, for the most part, everyday politics presuppose some kind of a ground or a foundation (e.g., economy, religion, class struggle, etc.). The second intuition is that political change is possible – everyday politics are characterized by a constant evolution, which, in turn, creates an impression that every political conjuncture is, in the last analysis, contingent and may eventually change. Importantly, the stronger our belief in a foundation of politics, the more difficult it becomes to safeguard the possibility of political change. If the ground of political conjuncture is fixed or final, the situation which it determines will equally be fixed or final. One way to marry together the two intuitions – that politics presupposes a foundation and that it is contingent – is to device a notion of a foundation *weak enough* to allow for the contingency of everyday politics.

The turn to Heidegger at this point appears obvious – it is Heidegger who offers the paradigmatic example of a weak ground, whose very functioning *undermines* its role as a foundation. Since Being ungrounds at the very same moment as it provides a ground for ontic beings, its political usage is able to appease both of our intuitions – namely, that there is a ground of politics and that ontic politics, because of the withdrawing of the ground, is contingent. To put it simply, every political situation has a foundation; however, since the ground of every ontic political situation is always already disappearing, *no* political situation is fixed – which means that *every* political situation is contingent and open to change. The introduction of the onto-political difference, therefore, preserves our belief in the

foundation of everyday politics, while at the same time allowing us to postulate the "necessary contingency" of politics. (Marchart, 2007, p. 25)

The ontological dimension of the political is never accessed directly; it can be only known through its effects in the realm of ontic politics. This seems to follow from the nature of the political – since its function as a foundation is always accompanied by its withdrawal, that is to say, by its absenting, it can never be *present* to the gaze of a political observer. Rather, because the foundation has always already disappeared, the political observer can only posit its existence on the basis of the observable instability of ontic politics. In short, the political is an "absent ground" that "has to be conceived as *negativity*" (Marchart, 2007, p. 5), known only through its effects. The ontological dimension can only be *inferred* from the constant changes we observe on the level of ontic politics:

"The presence of the political as the 'ontological' moment of society's institution, as we have repeatedly stressed, can only be inferred from the absence of a firm ground of society, from our experience of the incompletion of the realm of social beings, as it is indicated by the play of the political difference. Nobody has ever encountered the realm of the 'onto political *as such*, except in the cracks and fissures of the social which become filled, expanded or closed by – precisely – *politics*." (Marchart, 2007, pp. 174-175)

I believe that it is precisely at this point that Heideggerian political ontology is at its most vulnerable. It strikes me that the argument for the onto-political difference conflates two types of negativity. The first type of negativity refers to "our experience of the incompletion of the realm of social beings" – an experience of the incompleteness, discontinuity, and contingency of ontic politics, which enables us to pose a question about the conditions of this apparent contingency. The second type of negativity operative in the above argument is the negativity of the ontological foundation itself: the "absent ground" which cannot be encountered in itself, and which can only be known indirectly, via the realm of ontic politics. It is not clear that these two negativities are identical, as the Heideggerian argument seems to suggest. Whereas the first negativity applies to our experience, the second negativity refers to an ontological level, inaccessible to direct experience.

In the next section, I will develop a phenomenological critique of Heideggerian political ontology. Drawing on the works of Husserl, Levinas, and Malabou, I will demonstrate that the negativity proper to

our experience (i.e., negativity in the first sense) is not an indicator of an "absent ground" (i.e., negativity in the second sense). As I will show, certain objective and subjective phenomena involve an essential incompleteness, discontinuity, and contingency, without, however, indicating an absence or an abyss as its foundation. This, in turn, suggests that contingency of the ontic world is not evidence of the withdrawing ground – as the Heideggerians would like it to be; on the contrary, the appearance of the ontic world as contingent is might be a result of an interaction between our subjective faculties and the way in which *positive* ontological process are given to us. Not only is our experience of phenomena as incomplete or unstable not a necessary pointer to a negative ontological ground; the experience of instability and contingency is itself a possible effect of *positive* objects and *necessary* processes which produce our experience.

A phenomenological critique of Heideggerian political ontology

In what follows I will examine the phenomenological features of two experiences: a perception of a physical object, and an experience of aging. As I will show, both experiences are characterized by certain "negativities" (such as incompleteness, instability, and discontinuity), which, in turn, makes them *appear* contingent. However, I will argue that this apparent contingency is *not* an indicator of a negative or absent ground; on the contrary, the contingency fund in the appearance of physical objects and in the experience of aging is an *effect* of an interaction between our faculties as experiencers and *positive* objects and processes. In fact, to suggest that my incomplete or discontinuities experience indicates an absent or negative ground which would determine the experience as incomplete, would be to confuse the *experience* of an object or a process (which, indeed, is "negative") with an object or a process the experience is *of* – which remains a *positive* ground of my "negative" perception. Furthermore, as the analysis of aging will show, the positive ground of my experience can also be *necessary* – and as such it is still able to generate an experience that *appears* discontinuous and contingent.

If my analysis is correct, then the Heideggerian inference from the instability of ontic politics to the negativity of the ontological dimension is mistaken – the fact that everyday politics *appear* contingent does not necessitate a negative foundation. It is possible

that the observable incompleteness or discontinuity of ontic politics – in analogy with the incompleteness of the perception of physical objects or the discontinuity of the experience of aging – is simply an "optical effect" of interaction between our faculties as political observers and positive (and perhaps necessary) ontological processes. In other words, and in the manner of someone who mistakes a negative experience of an object for an experience of the object's negativity, Heideggerians mistake the negativity found on the level of ontic politics for the negativity of the ontological dimension of the political.

In the next section, I will sketch an alternative, positive political ontology. As I will show, not only is *positive* political ontology able to account for the grounded contingency of ontic politics; it also enables us to qualify the notion of contingency which characterizes political conjunctions more effectively than Heideggerian political ontology.

Let us first examine the "negativity" (or "negativities") inherent in the perception of a physical object. In section 44 of *Ideas I*, Husserl describes the experience of a three-dimensional, material object in the following way:

"Moreover, and this is also an essential necessity, the perception of a physical thing involves a certain *inadequacy*. Of necessity a physical thing can be given only "one-sidedly;" and that signifies, not just incompletely or imperfectly in some sense or other, but precisely what presentation by adumbrations prescribes. A physical thing is necessarily given in mere "modes of appearance" in which necessarily a *core* of *"what is actually presented"* is apprehended as being surrounded by a horizon of *"co-givenness" which is not givenness proper*, and of more or less vague *indeterminateness… To be in infinitum imperfect in this manner is part of the unanullable essence of the correlation between "physical thing" and perception of a physical thing."* (Husserl, 1983, p. 94)

The notion of *Abschattungen,* which has been translated as "adumbrations", refers to the fact that a spatial object presents itself only from a certain perspective and is given only from one side. For instance, when I perceive a book in a window of a bookshop, I can only see its cover. This is not simply a manner in which the book is displayed by the shopkeeper, but rather an essential and irreducible property of an appearance of a physical thing. The shopkeeper *cannot* display the book in its totality – whatever the position of the product, it will only present an aspect of itself while keeping other sides

hidden. Moreover, the given aspects "never exhaust things: by right, their number is infinite." (Levinas,1973, p. 21) Even if we assume that the shopkeeper places the book in the window differently every single day, the book will be always – and in principle – showing us aside, unable to give itself as a whole. Similarly, I can intuit an infinite number of aspects of an object, but the essential incompleteness – or one-sidedness – of the appearance of the object, will forever prevent me from reaching a god-like vision in which I intuit the complete physical thing. My perception is necessarily *inadequate*.

Nevertheless, what my incomplete perception attests to is not an absent or withdrawing object. Interestingly, Husserl observes that what is implicit in every one-sided intuition is anticipation of features of the object which do not present themselves to our intuition immediately. Even though I only see a cover of the book, I anticipate that it also has a spine, a back, and pages inside it. "The aspects which we see at any given moment always indicate further aspects, and so on." (Levinas, 1973, pp. 21-22) My perception of the book comes to me with implicit possibilities of the development of this perception. This Husserl refers to as a horizon. Whereas the horizon is strictly speaking *empty* (or *negative*) it in its emptiness it points towards a *positive* and complete physical object – the book.

It should be noted that there is also another, more radical form of inadequacy inherent in sensuous intuition, which Levinas in his commentary on Husserl refers to as "the negation or contingency" (Levinas, 1973, p. 23) belonging to the existence of physical objects. As we observed, an intuition of an aspect of a thing involves a horizon of implicit possibilities. Furthermore, as Aaron Gurwitsch notices, "on the basis of the present perception, not only can no choice between these possibilities be made, but also no one of them appears as favored in some sense or other over against others." (Gurwitsch, 2005, p. 119). When I throw a pencil to my friend across the classroom, I can be certain that while moving, the pencil will show itself from different sides. What I cannot tell with certainty, however, is which side will come next in the sequence of appearing of sides. Interestingly, this uncertainty can also assume a more radical form when the following perception contradicts the current one. My friend catches the pencil I threw and gets covered in ink – turns out I did not toss a pencil but a fountain pen. "Nothing guarantees in principle that the thing's subsequently realized aspects will not later contradict what has been

constituted until then." (Levinas, 1998, p. 65) However, we can deepen our uncertainty even more – not only is it possible that my pencil will turn out to be a fountain pen; the pencil could in fact be a hallucination: "further experience may, in principle, falsify and reduce to hallucination what had seemed to be acquired by a preceding perception." (Levinas, 1973, p. 22) We can imagine a situation in which, when I tell my friend: "look at those pink dots on the wall", she replies "there are no pink dots on the wall. You are hallucinating". I then realize that the sequence of perceptions of pink dots on the wall I had, was in fact a visual effect of my tiredness. Moreover, both the perception of pink dots on the wall and the hallucination of pink dots on a wall are exactly the same from an intentional point of view: "there are no phenomenologically relevant differences between a perception and a hallucination". (Zahavi, 2003, p. 40)

We can therefore identify the following "negativities" inherent in the experience of a physical object: the inadequacy (or one-sidedness) of my perception; the emptiness of the horizons with which the object is given; the uncertainty with regards to the subsequent development of my perception. All of these "negativities", in turn, contribute to the appearance of the physical object as contingent – the physical object I am currently perceiving in an inadequate manner may turn out to be a different object or a hallucination.

However, these "negativities" and the concomitant contingency found in perception, in no way necessitate a conclusion that the *object* I perceive is somehow marked by nothingness or groundlessness. The fact that I can be uncertain about the presence of the table in front of me (since I might be hallucinating), i.e., the fact that my perception of the table is contingent, does not mean that the table itself is withdrawing or absenting in grounding my experience. On the contrary, my inadequate experience of a table, *insofar as it is generated by a table*, attests to a positive object which determines my perception by being present in front of me. This basic fact is not changed by the uncertainty I might experience with regards to my individual perceptions of physical objects – the contingency of my perception is an effect of an *interaction* between my perceptual acts and the way in which the positive object is given, and *not* a result of a negative character of the determining object itself.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of aging. As I will demonstrate below, becoming-old is a subjective experience

which, similarly to the perception of a physical object, is characterized by a certain inadequacy. Importantly for our purposes, the negativity or contingency found in the experience of aging does not attest to the negativity of aging as a ground of my experience. As anyone who has aged can testify, becoming old is a *positive* and *necessary* process. Aging, therefore, provides another example of an incomplete and discontinuous experience that presupposes a positive – and in this case, necessary – ground of itself.

Catherine Malabou distinguishes between two ways of conceptualizing growing older. The first, she remarks, "is inconceivable apart from the gradual movement of 'becoming-old.'" This is aging as a steady process in which we slowly lose hair, put on weight, become wrinkled and weaker – this conception of growing older is comparable to the descent of a plane "which, without necessarily being linear or without turbulence, nevertheless proceeds through an orderly traversing of subsequent stages." (Malabou, 2012, p. 40) The changes in my body over time attests to aging as a positive process – my receding hairline or my wrinkles are observable effects of the steady process of becoming-old. Furthermore, these noticeable transformations are determined by a process that is irreversible and necessary. It does not matter how many plastic surgeries I undergo; my body will continue to get older.

For Malabou, the second way to understand aging is as an *event* – a "sudden rupture or flight crash, if you like." Here we no longer conceive of aging as a slow yet inevitable becoming-old, but rather "as an unexpected, sudden metamorphosis, like the ones we sometimes read about: 'her hair went white overnight.'" (Malabou, 2012, p. 41) This conception of aging is present in a scene from *One More Time with Feeling* (2016), a documentary about the life of the musician Nick Cave, where the protagonist looks into the camera examining his wrinkles and asks: 'When did I get old?' – as if the event of aging was an upsetting and surprising accident which took place suddenly, unnoticed or behind his back. It is as an *event* that aging appears at its most "negative". However, as I will show with the help of Levinas, the negativity of the event of aging is simply an effect of the way in which aging as a process shows itself to the subject. In other words, and in a way reminiscent of the perception of the physical object, the apparent negativity of aging as an event

presupposes the positivity and necessity of the process of becoming-old as its ground.

In *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas offers a detailed phenomenological description of the "negative" event of aging:

'Temporalization as a lapse, the loss of time, is neither an initiative of ego nor a movement toward some telos of action. The loss of time is not the work of a subject... Time passes. This synthesis which occurs *patiently*, called profundity passive synthesis, is aging. It breaks up under the weight of years and is irreversibly removed from the present, that is, from re-presentation. In self-consciousness, there is no longer a *presence* of self to self, but senescence. It is as senescence beyond the recuperation of memory that time, lost time that does not return, is a diachrony, and concerns me.' (Levinas, 2006, pp. 51-52)

For Levinas (and Nick Cave), aging is an event that takes place unnoticed or behind one's back. I can never witness the exact moment at which I aged; in fact, when I realized that I have aged, I am already too late – the event has already taken place. Levinas calls it a *lapse* of time – similarly to a record which skips and loses a note, time-consciousness skips and loses an instant. Moreover, and contrary to any Proustian sentiments, the moment at which I aged cannot be remembered – since the event of aging takes place behind the back of my present, it cannot be retained nor preserved in memory. In Levinas's parlance, the event of aging is *immemorial*. When, for the first time, I noticed my receded hairline, I couldn't recall when exactly I had lost my hair – the skipped instant has been lost and it cannot be retrieved by remembrance. Here the "negativity" of aging becomes apparent: the event of aging involves an absent instant which cannot be made present with the help of memory – the moment at which I aged has been irreversibly lost.

However, Levinas also speaks of the fact that "time passes": minute after minute, day after day, I – with patience and without resistance – become older. Here, aging is a *process*, which Levinas (following Husserl) calls "passive synthesis," and which names the continuous and irreversible functioning of time-consciousness. The continuity of time makes possible the inscription of each new moment into the arc of my life as retention, and, then, as memory ready to be remembered in the future. Importantly, the passive synthesis of time-consciousness is a *positive* experience accessible by introspection (Husserl, 1964, 2001). In short, aging as a process is both necessary

(insofar as it involves an irreversible passage of time) and positive (insofar as it can be accessed subjectively).

Importantly, however, for Levinas, aging *qua* event is inextricably bound up with the aging *qua* process: for the most part, each present is retained and turned into a potential memory; some moments, however, instead of being preserved, are irreversibly lost – the passive synthesis of time (i.e. the regular functioning of time-consciousness) inevitably "breaks up under the weight of years, and is irreversibly removed from the present". It is as if subjectivity was too full and despite itself needed to throw up the indigestible time. A similar conclusion is drawn by Malabou for whom the two conceptions of aging are complementary – any attempt to think of aging as *either* a process *or* an event would result in an incomplete picture. Aging is a complex phenomenon in which the continuity of its process does not preclude a possibility of a sudden discontinuity of its event: "Even in the most peaceful aging there will always be an accidental, catastrophic dimension." (Malabou, 2012, p. 41)

Even though for both Levinas and Malabou the two aspects of aging are inseparable, it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between the *ground* of experience, and the experience *produced by* the ground. I suddenly realize that I have aged – I look in the mirror and, for the first time, I notice grey hair. The event of aging has taken place. However, I experience this sudden event of aging only because of the necessary and positive process of aging – it is the process of aging that made possible my sudden experience of aging. The aging *qua* process, therefore, functions as a ground for the aging *qua* event.

However, if this is the case, we are once again confronted with a phenomenon in which the "negativity" found in the experience is determined by a positive (and in the example of aging) necessary ground. Aging as an event – with all its "negativity" – is simply an effect of a positive process of aging; more specifically, aging as an event is a mode in which aging as a process imposes itself on the subject. This, in turn, suggests that any inference from the "negativity" *of the experience* to the supposed negativity of *its ground* would be erroneous.

As the phenomenological analyses of a perception of a physical object and the experience of aging demonstrate, an experience of "negativity" (whether understood as incompleteness, contingency, or discontinuity) is not an indicator of negativity of the ground which

determines the "negative" experience in question. In fact, as we have seen, the subject can have a "negative" experience of a *positive* object or process. If I am correct, then the Heideggerian inference from the instability and incompleteness of ontic politics (i.e. from its "negativity") to the negativity of the ontological foundation seems invalid. There is nothing in the negativity of an experience (whether of physical objects, aging, or everyday politics) which necessitates a negative ground; on the contrary, it is possible that in analogy with other experiences considered in this section, the negativity of the experience of ontic politics is an "optical effect" of a positive ontological foundation.

Marchart rejects this possibility in principle. For him, proposing a positive view of the political is synonymous with a return to a classical political ontology (2007, p.17). This return, however, is unacceptable, because such a foundation would not be open to change (Marchart, 2007, p. 12), consequently, grounding everyday politics "once and for all" and thus preventing political evolution.

In the next section, I will sketch a positive political ontology, which, I hope to show, leaves open a possibility of political change, and as such cannot be classified as "classical" in Marchart's sense. In order to do so, I will draw on Marchart's later work on the ontological status of antagonism. As I will argue, when purified from its Heideggerian influences, Marchart's discussion of antagonism can provide a feasible prolegomenon to a positive political ontology.

A sketch of a positive political ontology

In the remainder of this paper, I will critically engage with the writings of Marchart in order to show that an ontological concept of antagonism can help us to develop a *positive* political ontology. Conceiving the political positively as antagonism is to suggest that conflict is necessary for politics and that it can be found in the entirety of the political realm. Antagonism, therefore, provides a positive and necessary foundation of ontic politics.

In the previous sections, I suggested that one of the benefits of Heideggerian political ontology is its ability to marry together two of our intuitions about everyday politics: firstly, that politics presupposes a foundation or ground, and secondly, that it is open to change and transformation. Is a positive political ontology of antagonism also able

to account for our two intuitions? I believe so. Firstly, it should be noted that a positive political ontology, by advocating an existence of a positive foundation, automatically satisfies our intuition about the *grounded* nature of politics. What remains problematic, however, is the possibility of political change – does a positive ontological foundation leave space for the contingency of politics? In order to answer this question, I will qualify the concept of contingency by arguing for a distinction between an *ontic* and *ontological* change. I will then suggest that the concept of antagonism can account for political change on the ontic level by implying a resolution of a conflict or an emergence of a new antagonism. However, it remains unclear if positive political ontology of antagonism allows for a possibility of an *ontological* change, i.e., of a transformation of the ontological foundation itself.

One of the challenges of using Marchart's work to elaborate a concept of antagonism as a *positive* ground of everyday politics is that Marchart himself is strongly committed to a *negative* political ontology. Consequently, he employs antagonism as a notion which safeguards an "absent ground" of ontic politics. However, at times, and, I am sure, unwittingly, Marchart seems to conceptualize antagonism in positive terms. Examine the following two quotes:

"…antagonism – perhaps the only truly political name of 'the political' – assumes the function of a groundless ground of social being… Antagonism, I will suggest, denotes an insurmountable blockage of society, an instance of radical negativity that simultaneously forces and precludes the closure of social differences into a totality." (Marchart, 2018, pp. 30-31)

"Let us take the simplistic example of an alliance of political forces all of which have their own differential demands of, for instance, affordable housing, gender equality, or the protection of the environment. There is no common ground intrinsic to all these demands. They are of an entirely differential nature… Their equivalence [necessary for their systematization] can only be established if a negative outside – defined as the political 'elite', 'neoliberalism' or the like – comes to serve as a common denominator… All forces in this alliance feel that their respective identity is blocked by an outside threat which, at the same time, serves as a *negative* reference point to their chain of equivalence. Hence, the only thing they have in common is something entirely negative." (Marchart, 2018, p. 21)

In both quotes, we encounter a familiar emphasis on negativity. For Marchart, various ontic demands (e.g., for affordable housing or for gender equality) are "systematized" or grounded by a common point of reference – an enemy against which they struggle. The ontological character of antagonism lies precisely in this relationship between, on the one hand, ontic demands, and, on the other, a common enemy which systematizes and grounds these demands. Importantly, according to Marchart, the common enemy is "entirely negative" – there are no positive determinations that could be applied to the shared point of reference of ontic demands. In consequence, antagonism constitutes a *negative* foundation because the grounding pole of the relationship it comprises – i.e., the common enemy – is itself negative. Ontologically speaking, to be in an antagonistic relationship is to be grounded by a negative instant; this negative instance, in turn, prevents "the closure of social difference into a totality."

However, in the second of the above quotes, Marchart *names* the supposedly negative examples of the common enemy: "elite" and "neoliberalism". But are these two terms really negative? Surely, both "elite" and "neoliberalism" can be defined positively – as "the top 1%" and a free-market economy, for instance. In fact, it seems that "elite" (for instance) plays a role of a common denominator for various struggles not due to its nature as an empty signifier, but rather, because it is packed with *positive* content (e.g. political privilege, wealth, etc.). Otherwise, it would be difficult to conceive how the conflict between a set of political demands and the "elite" can be generated – if the "elite" is simply negative, as Marchart, claims, how can there be political demands which target *specific* characteristics of the "elite" (e.g. benefiting from exploitation)?

My belief is that Marchart is right in emphasizing the ontological role of antagonism. A conflict between a set of demands and a common enemy systematizes and grounds ontic politics. However, Marchart's Heideggerian commitments lead him to argue for an indefensible thesis, namely, that the grounding pole of a conflictual relationship is negative. I would like to suggest a correction to Marchart's understanding of antagonism – the conflictual relationship can only be generated by two *positive* poles (say, between advocates of a redistribution of wealth and the "elite" which hoards wealth); consequently, the notion of antagonism is entirely positive, and it is as such that is able to found ontic political conflicts.

Interestingly, in his earlier work, Marchart hints at the possibility of antagonism being necessary. Commenting on Claude Lefort's reading of Machiavelli, Marchart writes:

"In the ninth chapter of the *Prince*, Machiavelli declares that the nobles on one side and the people on the other are engaged in an irresolvable struggle due to their opposing *umori*. While the 'humor' or desire of the nobles is to command and to oppress, the desire of the people, on the other hand, is not to be commended and not to be oppressed. This constitutive and irreducible opposition between the people and the nobles *precedes* the particular social circumstances or traditions in which they are situated. Conflict… precedes any *factual* reasons for conflicts in the plural…Wherever there is society – no matter how it is ontically structured – there is internal antagonism at the ontological level." (Marchart, 2007, pp. 97-98)

This quote confirms my thesis about the positivity of antagonism – Marchart is clear that the demands of the people (to live without oppression) resist the positive "humor" of the nobles, which makes them prone to command and oppress. However, Marchart also introduces a further thesis, namely, that *any* society, regardless of its ontic makeup, presupposes an "internal antagonism at the ontological level". Whether we live in Machiavelli's Italy, Lefort's France, or Marchart's Austria, antagonism grounds the everyday struggles which permeate our political conjuncture. This means that antagonism is not only a positive but also a *necessary* ontological foundation of everyday politics.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the problem faced by a positive political ontology is the safeguarding of the contingency of ontic politics – if the foundation of politics is positive and necessary, how is political change possible? Before showing that political ontology of antagonism can be reconciled with the possibility of political transformations, I will qualify the concept of contingency operative in onto-political discussions. This qualification will help us to better grasp the *types* of political change we should account for.

From the point of view of Heideggerian political ontology, the realm of politics is "necessarily contingent" in two, interrelated senses. On the one hand, "contingency" applies to the ever-changing ontic politics. On the other hand, "contingency" refers to the ontological dimension of the political as an always withdrawing ground of ontic politics – as Marchart puts it, "'contingency' becomes

the operational term whose function is to indicate precisely this necessary impossibility of a final ground." (2007, pp. 25-26). As I have claimed, political Heideggerians infer the negativity and contingency of the ontological dimension from the negativity and contingency found on the level of ontic politics. What this inference presupposes is a *continuity* of the concept of contingency – for the ontic contingency to indicate ontological contingency, there must be an intimate relationship (if not identity) between these two usages of the term. If ontic contingency was radically different from ontological contingency, observing the former should not lead us to the latter. I believe that this presupposition is incorrect; not only is the inference from ontic contingency to ontological contingency incorrect; the two notions of contingency are, in fact, discontinuous.

This conclusion follows from the analysis of the previous section. As I argued there, negativity and contingency fund in the experience can be generated by positive and/or necessary objects and processes. Experiential contingency is an "optical effect" produced by an interaction between a perceiver and a positive ground of an experience. In the context of political ontology, this means that ontic contingency – the observable change on the level of everyday politics – could be an *effect* of an interaction between political observers and positive ontological processes. This means that changes on the level of ontic politics can have a positive and necessary ontological foundation. By contrast, the positive and necessary foundation cannot be reconciled with a negative and contingent ground (since these two types of foundation are by definition incompatible). If this claim is correct, then there can be no continuity between ontic contingency and its ontological counterpart: *ontic* contingency is potentially compatible with necessary ontological processes, whereas this cannot be true about contingency conceived as an *ontological* ground.

One of the consequences of the discontinuity between ontic and ontological contingency is that it problematizes the notion of political change. When we say that our political ontology safeguards political transformation by affirming the contingency of politics, we should clarify if we mean it in an ontic or an ontological register (similarly, if we engage in politics, it is important to know if our tactics aim to bring about ontic or ontological change). As we have seen, change on the level of ontic politics seems unproblematic for two reasons: firstly, because it is an observable fact; secondly, because it is compatible

with *any* type of ontological foundations (i.e. it can be determined by a negative ground, but I can also be an effect of a positive foundation). Naturally, a political ontology should still be able to account for the *conditions* of ontic political change, which explain this observable fact. A more difficult question is whether our intuition about the contingency of politics is only applicable to the ontic level of everyday politics or whether it can also be extended to the ontological dimension of the political. In short, can there be a change *in* the ontological foundation itself, even when this foundation is positive?

As I have argued, antagonism can help us to formulate a positive political ontology, which recognizes the necessity of ontological processes which determine ontic politics. Importantly, however, the notion of ontological antagonism can also account for our intuition about the contingency of politics by spelling out the conditions of ontic political change. The very idea of a conflict implies a possibility of a resolution – any ontic conflict (e.g. between the nobles and the people) can end by a victory of one side over the other, or by a comprise satisfying both sides. Ontic politics, therefore, can *change*, on the one hand, by a resolution of a conflict, and, on the other hand, by an emergence of a new antagonism (e.g. between critics and advocates of neoliberalism).

Can positive political ontology also account for the *ontological* change? Is a transformation of the positive ontological foundation *itself* possible?

I accused Heideggerians of making an invalid inference from the contingency of ontic politics to the contingency of ontological foundation. I must confess that it is very tempting to have recourse to a similar (and potentially invalid) argument and to claim that because ontic conflicts can be resolved, ontological antagonism should also be open to resolution. This temptation comes from the fact that the neutralization of ontological antagonism promises a novel form of *non-antagonistic* politics – a new type of politics free of conflict and hostility.

Is the idea of non-antagonistic politics simply a mistaken inference or a real possibility? Settling this problem exceeds the scope of this paper.

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